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THE FOSTER CARE OF NEGLECTED AND DEPENDENT CHILDREN

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More than fifty years of controversy on the part of children's workers as to which offers the better care,—the family or the institution,—would never have taken place if all the parties interested had enjoyed a common understanding of the significance of what the modern social worker calls case work, that elastic, imaginative, penetrating understanding of each individual in need, that process of interpretation that never looks upon the individual as a solitary, isolated being, but as very closely related to many people and things and difficult to understand.

Most of the workers engaged in the children's field of service have for years past developed systems of care and methods of treatment which they felt were indisputably right. One of the interesting developments of a good case work job is the discovery that it becomes increasingly difficult to classify rigidly the children or people you study. One child will be considered by an ineffective social worker as dependent but by a much more skilled worker as representing a variety of conditions other than dependency. There are copious illustrations along this line in society's treatment of adult delinquents. The more we know of the conditions causing crime, the more do we understand that pure delinquency as such is a very rare condition in any individual's life. Just so we discover through case work that pure dependency and pure neglect are equally rare conditions in the lives of children. They may be neglected; they may be in need of foster care; but they are also a series of different entities, some intelligent, some unintelligent, some capable of great growth, others not, some well, some sick, some properly trained, many improperly trained, some in need of a certain special individual touch, others equally in need of a radically different oversight and supervision.

The laboratory method has prevailed less in children's work than in most other fields of social work. There has been little actual

studying of methods and results, little open-mindedness; but on the contrary, often a fierce and violent contentiousness on the part of advocates, irrespective of the system in question, who were convinced that those differing from them were entirely in the wrong.

We are here considering foster care of children who by reason of sickness, death, incompetency, improper guardianship or wilful neglect on the part of their parents or relatives, must be provided for in foster homes. We are not including in this group children whose parents are suffering solely from poverty. Such children do not properly come within the scope of an organization giving foster care, but fall within the field of organizations giving relief in any form or able to advise and otherwise assist in the carrying out of plans which relieve the condition of poverty without giving material relief. We are not eliminating from this neglected and dependent group, children who by reason of the parental treatment they have received present special problems in the way of discipline but who do not fall within the so-called delinquent class.

All of the countries of western Europe, and the United States and Canada have for two generations been engaged in the process of developing certain special methods looking to the best care of children who for any reason must be taken from their own families. The time has arrived, however, for a proper understanding of the only dependable method of approach to the care and treatment of such children. The whole controversy between institutions and agencies engaged in children's work and giving different types of care can be settled only through the application of good case work. Only in this way can there be carved out for each child that type of care which it most needs, and for each institution or agency that task or service which the community where it operates most needs.

The introduction of case work has meant the revolution of medicine and law and is meaning the revolution of social work. Every branch of social work which is touched by case work methods, is in process of revamping its technique, with such results as make the newer type of service a very different thing from the service of even a few years ago. The problems of the destitute, of the sick, of the insane and mentally defective, of the delinquent, of the dependent, are now being expressed in terms of hopefulness and understanding such as were almost entirely absent in the past. This case work approach to work with children has particular significance because

children more than any other members of society will most benefit from it.

The approach to any neglected or dependent child, as to any other individual, adult or child, should be made only in the spirit of understanding his needs, of trying to meet them rather than with a feeling that his needs have already been interpreted; that he has already been classified; and that rigid and inelastic methods of treatment are always proper and wise. With such diverse groups of children, whose needs arise by reason of certain conditions in their own homes, the children's organization must deal, and it must so adjust its work as to be able to provide the special and intimate services, sympathies and understanding, which are the right of every child and without which no child can develop normally.

It is the task of the social worker to know the children with whom he or she is dealing, to see things from their standpoint as much as from the standpoint of the adults and others who have affected the life of the particular child, and then to try to provide through social treatment the essentials which careful study shows the child to have lacked. Therefore, every children's organization which expects to do an effective, helpful service to the children and to the community which it reaches, must be provided with workers who are competent to understand the social problems which the children present, to get their right relationship, and then to apply the most effective social treatment.

This better type of care will in many instances apparently cost more than less thorough work, but actually the best and most complete service to an individual in need, no matter how great the cost, is in the end the least expensive. Moreover, on the cost side, the war has fastened upon many people of all social positions this one great idea; that if so much money can be spent for a special national protective work, then with equal justice may society publicly or privately spend far larger sums than we have thought advisable in the past for the proper care and training of thousands of children who through no fault of their own stand in need of development and opportunities which their parents cannot or will not give to them.

As has been noted, we are not concerned in this paper with the problem of care for children in families where poverty is the chief cause of distress. One general principle should control all work for children, namely, that the child's own family ties with parents or

other relatives, if it is living with the latter, should be broken only as a last resort. Because good case work does not hold with all children's agencies, this principle is not observed; action is often taken in ignorance of the child's real home conditions and resources, and he is injured rather than helped; for foster care, although it may be of the best, is nevertheless, in many instances, a poor substitute for the care which parents could and would have given if the means, opportunities or advice, had been provided. Even applications for temporary care of children should be carefully studied because often the thing asked for is not what is needed and other than temporary care may be necessary and imperative.

The work of the Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Public Charities, New York City, under Commissioner Kingsbury, is proof of how more careful case work means the keeping of many children with their own people. Fewer children were committed by the Department to the children's institutions in New York City during the last years of Mr. Kingsbury's term than were committed during the term of the previous Commissioner, the decrease being the result of a more careful understanding of family problems affecting thousands of children.

CASE METHODS APPLIED

Let us apply case methods to the following special problems which concern every social worker and especially every children's worker. Consider the question of adoptions. A study of the reports of certain children's home and children's aid societies and certain institutions scattered all over the country, shows a surprisingly large number of complete adoptions of children for each year of their work. A study of the reports of other organizations, often in the same localities and usually dealing with the same types of children and caring for equally large numbers of children, shows almost no adoptions. Why is this so? Careful study leads one to feel that the difference is due largely to the lack of adequate case treatment on the part of the first class of agencies and to the use of good case methods on the part of the second class.

The case work approach to the adoption problem presents a series of very special difficulties. First, the more one studies intake (that is, the more one studies the applications for care presented by parents, relatives, interested friends, and coöperating agencies,

public and private), the more one finds out that there are relatively few children without some ties of relationship which should be preserved. This holds equally true for the child who is usually adopted and for the child who is given long time free home or boarding care, either in institutions or families.

The great majority of children now given for adoption are illegitimate children. However, a large number are the children of lawfully married people, who for a variety of reasons are willing to give up their children or to permit their children to be taken from them under curiously illegal legal agreements entered into with the caring agency.

The well trained social worker will try to preserve for a dependent or neglected child such ties of relationship as will help it. She will also understand that full knowledge about the child she is helping will inevitably mean better care.

The adoption of a child should mean the answering of at least these questions:

1. Is an injury being done to its parents or relatives in taking it from them or keeping it from them?
2. Are they quite unable, with proper assistance, to train their own child?
3. Are we certain that the adoption proceedings do not represent an escape from proper responsibilities on the part of a parent?
4. Is the child well physically? Is it well mentally?
5. Have we fully satisfied ourselves as to why in each particular instance the relationship, provided the parents are living, is being severed?
6. Are we trying where possible to keep alive the relationship between brothers and sisters, assuming that the child considered for adoption has brothers and sisters?

Our failure as communities to apply case work methods to the adoption problem has meant that courts, communities, governing bodies and social agencies have quite underestimated the significance of their large adoption rates. Social conditions are not right in a community that year by year is agreeing to adoptions of large numbers of children.

Each unmarried mother takes on an entirely new significance if we survey the adoption of her child in the manner suggested. The maternity homes get into a right relationship to their jobs when case work methods are applied. Our failure to apply the case method to illegitimacy has meant our failure up until now to get the real significance of our illegitimacy situation. Only as innumerable stories

are studied and analysed will we get beyond the stage of simply passing out illegitimate babies without knowing exactly why they come and how the tragedies back of each little child may largely be prevented.

Careful case work with unmarried mothers shows a high percentage of capable mothers who, if given the opportunity, have training possibilities which would benefit their babies. Careful case work also shows that many unmarried mothers are feeble-minded or suffering from syphilis or gonorrhea, and frequently that babies of the latter class suffer from syphilis. How necessary does it become to see that babies with this inheritance of feeble-mindedness or disease are not placed in families where the opportunities offered will be wasted upon them.

Our tendency to provide foster care for illegitimate children so easily and so constantly, in ignorance of the conditions from which the child has sprung, is evidence of the fact that legal injustices with reference to illegitimate children and social injustices with reference to mother and child still persist.

When each unmarried mother and her child are studied with a view to their best development, there will be many instances in which it would seem wisest to arrange for the adoption of the child, and these children will then be most accurately placed in families according to their abilities based on physical and mental health. More mothers will receive support from the fathers of their babies, more mothers will be assisted in getting from the experience of unmarried motherhood that protection which will help them and their children and the state. At the present time the failure to apply case work generally to the illegitimacy problem means a ruinous shifting of responsibilities to other parties who do not always continue with them. The best societies for the protection of children from cruelty are constantly removing children from adoptive homes where conditions of neglect hold, the primary reason for the condition of neglect often being due to the fact that some agency or person at the time of adoption did not know the whole story with reference to the child's physical and mental history.

All students of the problem of child care agree that the normal family is the ideal place for the rearing and training of children. This position was emphatically affirmed at the White House Conference in 1909, and has been constantly reaffirmed since then

by children's workers of all interests, including institutions and placing-out societies. The chief difficulty on the part of the leading institution people is their fear that there are not enough good families. An adequate understanding of neglected and dependent children on the basis of good case work, prevents one from saying that either family or institutional care exclusive of the other completely meets our needs. However, the more carefully the children's organization, whether institution or placing-out society, studies its applications in terms of case work, the more constantly does it see that it must continuously base its major services on something approximating family life.

It was case work, although this term was not used, that led to the development of the cottage type of institution; it was case work that drove home the idea that the congregate prison is an evil and a terribly injurious institution; it was case work that showed the courts that community life and family life may be tried with increasing numbers of those charged with delinquencies and with helpful results; it was case work that carried the hospital contacts from bed-side or clinic out into the family and the community; it is case work that is making each progressive children's agency see every child it receives as having a variety of needs which can best be met by family life or its approximation if they are within an institution, and that the desirable thing is to strive to transfer the training task as rapidly as possible to family centers.

Thorough case work, as applied to home-finding or more specifically the securing of foster family homes for children, is of very recent growth. The fact that home-finding methods generally have contained so many elements of chance has made many institution people feel that good institutional care is a much more certain and definite thing to follow. If potential foster homes are studied in exactly the same way that other families known to social agencies are studied, the element of chance is increasingly eliminated and then is there possible that adjusting of particular children to particular families which so many of us have talked about and so seldom realized. If the home-finding job had always been what some of its advocates have said it was, there would be few types of institutional care in existence. The application of case methods to this division of children's work will effect as great a revolution on the home-finding side as on the institutional side.

It is a fact that most families into which neglected and dependent children finally go for care are selected in a pretty superficial way. Even reputable children's agencies which exercise great care in determining the children they will receive are content with much less thorough service in selecting the foster families to which the children are to go. Most well organized cities throughout the country now have confidential exchanges and yet it is rare to find the children's organizations using these exchanges for their foster homes.

A potential foster home should be studied with the utmost care and everyone having important knowledge as to its training ability or disability should be searched out. In too many instances workers are prone to let the question of approval rest on a small fund of information furnished by the family plus a few references which they have given, and occasionally information from independent sources known only to the society. It is no wonder that the most thoughtful students believing in the institutional methods—who see only the work of these agencies—look with questioning on such a procedure.

Family home work for babies is largely a matter of getting expert physical care. Yet an organization paying regard only to the physical factors may by reason of faulty work do great injury to the unmarried mother of a baby in such a home. One society reported the family of a physician who with his wife was able to give most intelligent care to certain babies placed with them, and there were no difficulties offered until the baby of a young unmarried mother was placed in this home. Then the discovery was made that the physician was a man of low morals and had gravely tempted the girl immediately on his learning that she was unmarried.

Where families are being sought for the foster care of babies, it is not necessary to search only for good disciplinarians, or for people of unusual education, but the home life must be good, especially where there are contacts with unmarried mothers. Often the most effective work done is through the foster mother rather than the visitor, who is most directly concerned with the supervision of the mother and baby.

For quite a long while a difference of opinion has existed among the children's workers most interested in the care of children in families, with regard to the value of free homes as against boarding homes. The advocates of the free type of home have contended that they

used a better type of home than was true of the type largely engaged in boarding out. If one approaches the dispute with a view to ascertaining all the facts, or in other words follows the case method, certain things will stand out: first, that free homes are generally restricted to very little children who are without family ties or whose family ties can be severed without opposition from parents or others. These children are supposedly well and must generally be attractive; that is, sick, diseased or unattractive children do not come within this class. Second, older children, generally over twelve, are received into free homes because of certain services they may render.

It therefore becomes evident that a great many children whose family ties cannot be severed, or children who are unattractive and come from poor, low grade homes, who are sick or impaired physically or mentally, must be provided for in other than free homes.

In many states which have developed strong free home agencies, agencies that do almost no boarding out, there has also grown up a number of institutions which under this system have to take over the job of caring for children whom no one is desirous of fitting into families. Moreover, many of the free home organizations have felt strongly that to develop a boarding out service, that is to provide board in families for these children whom they could not place in free homes, would tend to decrease the scope of their free home work.¹

¹ The situation in Massachusetts has been pointed to as bearing this out. This state has approximately 10,000 children in families under the care of public and private organizations. Of the 10,000 approximately two-thirds are in boarding homes. There is none of the free home development in the state such as holds in other states, but there is likewise none of the institutional development, because the public and private organizations are quick to give family care to a child even if board has to be paid when they are certain that such children cannot secure opportunity for free care.

The situation in New York illustrates the results of a non-boarding out development of the children's field. There has grown up alongside the important free-home children's agencies an increasing institutional population. Part of this institution growth has no doubt been due to the subsidy system, but a large part has been due to the fact that there were no private agencies standing for the boarding out idea. In other words, the case work method, involving elasticity and adjustment to the needs of a particular situation, was not in evidence.

The development of the children's Home Bureau of the New York City Department of Public Charities and the placing of many hundreds of children in families at board during the first year and a half of the Bureau's existence, is striking proof of the wisdom of this addition to the free home equipment in the state and has suggested to some of the best institution people opportunities for growth and a transfer of activities from the institution to the family plan.

It is utterly useless to say that family care is better than institutional care for a particular child, unless we are prepared to give continuing, penetrating supervision. A children's society placing its wards in families and giving inadequate supervision is offering no arguments against institutional care but may be offering many in favor of it.

Good case work in the children's field, among other things involves seeing an accepted responsibility through to its conclusion, yet it is not good case work so to load a visitor with children placed out in families as to make it impossible for her to do more than pay a few fleeting visits in the course of a year. The standards set by a small number of children's organizations of forty to fifty children to a visitor are simply not accepted by children's agencies generally. If the development of opportunities for free home care is checked, the fault is due to the neglect of the workers rather than to the injurious results of the boarding out plan. Almost none of the agencies using either method exclusively have accumulated important history records for the children in their care. This has meant, of course, a lack of accurate and complete data which must preclude any scientific study. It cannot be stated too frequently that this whole question of child care is capable of scientific interpretation and unsupported opinions must give way to statements based on facts.

On the other hand, few institutions have kept records of their work in such shape as to make it possible to study now the results of their services and determine wherein certain types can best be cared for in institutions rather than in families. A careful study of case histories of children in need of temporary care, conducted by both institutions and family agencies, ought to disclose data as to which has brought the more helpful service to the children.

The executive officers of the Massachusetts Trustees for Training Schools, who have in charge the three state industrial schools for children, feel very strongly that whereas probation for a child in the community represents a procedure that should be tried in almost every instance where a juvenile delinquent is involved, yet the dividing line between what a family can do and what a training or industrial school can do for a child is not clearly and definitely understood by very many children's workers. This same indefiniteness holds in the matter of institutional and family care where neglected and dependent children are involved. The doctors and lawyers

are constantly expressing medical and legal problems in terms of cases. Dr. Richard C. Cabot's "Differential Diagnosis" is an evidence of something that we should have in social work. The problem of the best kind of foster care, whether in families or in institutions, could best be stated and understood if we had monographs giving histories and treatments of given groups of children: children related; children without relatives or brothers or sisters; children with no special problems, others with very special problems of health, impaired minds, or bad habits.

Returning to the matter of adoptions, it would throw great light upon a most important question if certain organizations dealing with neglected adoptive children could study and re-state for the public the histories and treatment of the children involved and give especially the reasons why these children had to be removed a second time often from homes of neglect.

The case method is also admirable for use in weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the community in which an effort is to be made to place children in families as against giving them institutional care. There are many communities in the United States offering less than a proper minimum in the way of social life. The schools are poor, the terms are short, industrial opportunities are nil, housing is bad, the country is sparsely settled,—it is folly for any children's worker to contend that where such conditions prevail proper family life with necessary neighborhood contacts will be found in sufficient quantity always to provide for all the children in need of care.

The tendency of many of the child-placing agencies to sing the praises of the ideal home and then to dodge so far as actual work is concerned the care and adequate training of the more difficult children referred to them, with particularly serious results at the time of adolescence, has thrown upon the institutions a very difficult task. This has particular reference to the giving of care to dependent or neglected older boys and girls. Every well-informed child-placing agency knows that when children of twelve or thirteen or fourteen years are referred for care, the problem of treatment, and the certainty of good results, are very different from the cases of much younger children.

The family agency in receiving a child at this age has a much more difficult if not impossible task in building it into the texture

of a family. Years of neglect make most necessary for the particular child very intensive, special care and not every good home, good from the standpoint of morals, cleanliness, intelligence, etc., is able to provide that accumulation of interests which the adolescent child demands and has to have. The psychology of this particular children's situation has not been shaped up, at least so as to affect the work of children's organizations as a whole.

A certain type of institution, the like of which is rare, might be so effective in giving care to these older children, or children who arrive at a period of dependency at a late age, as to be in advance of the family agencies; but there should be no uncertainty about it and either of the plans can be entered upon with certainty only if the histories and treatment of each child involved are studied and the combined experiences properly interpreted.

The extent to which institutional care is given by the Catholic Church to its children is a cause for constant comment, especially as this holds with reference to little children, because if there is flexibility in methods, these are the very children that are most easy to place in families. The difficulty of getting enough Catholic families into which these children might go has been offered by some as a reason for the institutional emphasis. The experience, however, of the New York Department of Charities in placing large numbers of Catholic children in homes of their own faith and in a district as congested as the area surrounding greater New York would seem in a measure to dispute this contention. It is also important to note the work of the Massachusetts State Board of Charity in placing its wards in homes of their own faith.

In the giving of foster care, whether in institutions or families, there are other special considerations having a particular religious significance. With this constant emphasis on training along certain sectarian lines as laid down by various religious denominations, there is interjected a special difficulty from the placing out standpoint. Good case work, irrespective of any interest in any particular religious creed, will see to it that a child is placed generally in a home of its own religious belief; that is, a Catholic child in a Catholic home, a Protestant child in a Protestant home, a Jewish child in a Jewish home. Now, it frequently happens that a home thought of for a particular child is good on every count except that it is of a different religious belief. Frequently the argument is heard that

placement in this home for the child in question can have no serious effect on the child. It will be allowed to continue its own religious life, and the utmost respect will be paid to its own religious opinions. Holding liberal religious views, the writer of this article feels that such an argument is wrong.

Growing out of experience with a variety of children's problems, one does realize that the statement made above that few children are without ties of relationship which can be severed completely, is indisputably true. The child's early religious training results in the formation of certain interests and possessions which cannot be lightly dropped. Therefore, while a child will benefit physically and in many ways socially by care in a good home of other than its own faith, conflicts are presented to the child which affect it most seriously in its later reunion with family and friends. An element of doubt on a hitherto undebatable subject is injected at a time when the child is often least able to get his proper bearings. This would seem to lead to the plan that familiar religious atmospheres and training must be continued for a child when receiving foster care, involving as it may institutional care. There is the further argument that unless a child is placed in his old religious atmosphere, he will wander from a particular religious denomination and may thus be lost to the membership of a particular church, a spirit of propaganda for which the writer has no sympathy.

Careful follow-up records should be kept by every family or institutional organization of the foster homes in use; that is, after the initial reception investigation with all of its ramifications has been made and a decision to use the home has been reached, then all further contacts with that home should be summarized and entered on the record, so that the home's training and development under the direction of good family visitors, the results of care given to the different children received into the home, and the reasons for success or failure in given instances, should all be there. The records should also show changes in the family structure. In so many instances the children's agencies are prone to forget that the family organization as presented at the time when first used will not last forever, and that a very good home, good because certain members were there, may become a very bad home because certain members have died or left. An illustration of this is the home of a deserted wife whose husband had long been away, and whose children showed

the effects of her good training. Her home was an excellent training place for children who had been deprived of their own parents, but became a very bad place especially for girls when the husband returned and the wife, out of a mistaken sense of responsibility, felt she could not turn him out of doors.

Under such a record system, the visitors would be so accurately and completely informed as to choose the foster homes with greater certainty of success. If a number of children's organizations were to keep such family records, it would then be possible to show under what family conditions the children, with all of their varying personalities, best develop. It would also be possible to show the homes that had been rejected or later disapproved because of the development of conditions which were not evident or were not discoverable at the time of their acceptance. Monographs on such records of experience would help all children's workers and every intelligent social worker dealing with children's problems would have a new value placed on her best work.

The country is in the midst of its greatest social crisis. No children's organization need feel that more careful study will lead to its elimination for if it base all of its work on good case studies the treatment will be of the right sort. Case work with children means knowing them and when intelligent people know them they treat them wisely. Knowledge here is power to do the right thing.